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ABSTRACT

A cooperative effort by administrators and institutional researchers to assess the public image of an institution of higher education as one step in the planning process is described. Discussed are the interpersonal dynamics occurring in the recognition of the general problem, the formulation of specific questions, the design of the survey instrument, and the communication of the results. The results--external negative evaluations--were transformed into a framework to reinforce planned change to make the recruitment/admissions/registration process more efficient and effective. In this case, administrators and institutional researchers, within the political context of the institution, successfully addressed the social obstacles to effective use of institutional research. (Author/LBH)

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ADMINISTRATORS AND RESEARCHERS -- COWORKERS IN UNIVERSITY PLANNING
A Case Study of a Successful Cooperative Venture in Research

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Abstract

This paper describes a cooperative effort by administrators and institutional researchers to assess the public image of an institution of higher education as one step in the planning process. It discusses the interpersonal dynamics occurring in the recognition of the general problem, the formulation of specific questions, the design of the survey instrument, and the communication of the results. The results--external negative evaluations--were transformed into a framework to reinforce planned change to make the recruitment/admissions/registration process more efficient and effective. In this case, administrators and institutional researchers, within the political context of the institution, successfully addressed the social obstacles to effective use of institutional research.

Administrators and Researchers--Co-workers in University Planning:
A Case Study of a Successful Cooperative Venture in Research

This paper discusses the major obstacles to the effective use of institutional research in planning by administrators. It then presents a case study of a successful cooperative effort between administrators and institutional researchers to assess the public image of a university as one step in the planning process.

The major obstacles to the effective use of institutional research are not technical but social in nature. They include:

1. Misunderstanding of differing roles
 - a. Differences between operational functions of managers and political and stewardship functions of administrators, i.e., why the question was asked in the first place
 - b. Differences between supporting roles of data gatherers and participating roles of researchers
2. Lack of ongoing reciprocal relationships between administrators and researchers to create stable, long-lasting channels of social influence
3. Misunderstanding of the human context in which policy decisions are made, i.e., internal politics of consensus
4. Apprehensions regarding research information leading to personal loss

In this case study, administrators and institutional researchers successfully addressed the social obstacles to effective use of institutional research within the political context of the institution. The survey described was conducted to assess:

1. Public image of the institution
2. Demands for educational services
3. Effectiveness of communication about the institution

It considers the interpersonal dynamics occurring in the recognition of the general problem, the formulation of specific questions, the design of the survey instrument, and the communication of the results which were transformed into a framework to reinforce planned change.

Major Social Obstacles

In this era of declining enrollment and changing market demands, many administrators are seeking timely, concise and non-technical information upon which to base a reassessment of the goals and objectives of higher education. Unfortunately the literature is replete with examples where the institutional research was neither timely, concise, nor appropriate. All too often, such failures have resulted in useless name-calling and blaming on the part of the institutional researchers and administrators alike, rather than in cooperative attempts to correct the problems.

In The Culture of Narcissism, Christopher Lasch envisioned a future American society in which "typical personality structure [is one] in which Narcissism predominates" (Maccoby, 1978). Above all, he finds academics extremely narcissistic. They are contemptuous "of students, implacable against intellectual rivals and unforgiving of those who criticize their pet ideas or worse yet, fail to cite their work" (p. 61).

Is this not the group from which administrators are chosen? Is this the reason why institutional research is ignored, or is it because institutional researchers are, as in Gilmore's opinion (1976), sometimes intellectually arrogant?

Surely conflict is not as inevitable as Gilmore believes, although he admits that conflict is not always detrimental to an

organization. In fact, he states that conflict may be seen as an element which facilitates decision making. However, rarely do adversary proceedings generate more thorough evaluations of the problems or generate optimum decisions. This lack of cooperation seems to stem from the fact that often, change-oriented information is threatening to administrators.

In addition, Gilmore feels that the various value systems, backgrounds, and past career patterns call for qualitatively different problem-solving approaches. He perceives administrators as dealing with problems in a piecemeal or incremental fashion while perceiving institutional researchers as rational and scholarly. In his opinion, decision makers may be resentful of having to depend on institutional researchers who in turn do not like to find themselves in a totally supportive function.

Cameron Fincher (1975) finds the issue complicated and poorly understood. Fincher believes that educational institutions are presently involved in assimilating the changes of the sixties and that they must evolve a grand strategy with "acceptable solutions to identifiable problems" (p.12).

In Fincher's opinion, four grand strategies to regain consensus have been offered--accountability, alternative learning, planned change, and the policy sciences. But in a careful analysis he concludes that "American colleges have enough superficial similarities to corporate business and industry to make the adoption of managerial techniques quite sensible as a form of protective coloration" (p.13), but little else. The wholesale adoption of PPBS (Planning, Programming, Budgeting, Systems) ignores the peculiarities of higher

education and above all ignores the need for much groundwork to be laid and a new set of rules to be devised. In all, the grand strategy of "accountability has thus far failed to develop an adequate concept of evaluation, to provide useful measures of educational effectiveness, and to specify how the information and data so arduously gathered can be used for institutional and program improvement" (p. 14).

The concept of accountability originates in the age of technology in which every activity should be cost effective. Attempts to change academic administrators so that they behave in an economical, rational manner is frustrating for the academic administrator as well as for those who see planned change and efficient use of resources as a necessary step in the future of higher education. McGuire (1978) regards the management of business affairs as an unnatural human activity since man is "inherently disposed toward the spectacular, the mystical, the playful, the magical and even the scientific but that the human propensity to be pragmatic, practical, and businesslike is an acquired taste, an attitude which must be continually nurtured and reinforced. . ." (p. 32).

In the literature of dissatisfaction with the use of institutional research findings, several issues can be identified as major obstacles to the effective use of institutional research findings by administrators which can be overcome. For the most part the issues are not technical or quantitative but social in nature.

Misunderstanding of Differing Roles and the Politics of Consensus

One of the most serious obstacles to the use of institutional research is the misunderstanding by the researcher (and often administrators as well) of the difference between the functions of managers and those of administrators (Balderston, 1974; Moore, 1976; Parker and Gardener, 1978). Both managers and administrators require very different types of information to support their differing roles. It is therefore critical for researchers to recognize that institutions of higher education are administered, not managed.

Managers are production oriented and are interested principally in refining management choices, controlling operations (i.e., production, sales, etc.) and measuring performance against predetermined standards or norms (Parker & Gardener, 1978). Consequently, managers need systematic, highly accurate, recurring reports.

On the other hand, administrators in higher education are oriented toward stewardship and political issues (Gilmore, 1976; Moore, 1976; Parker & Gardener, 1978). Administrators in higher education regard themselves as being protectors of cultural values which are largely intangible and difficult, if not impossible, to quantify. For example, institutions of higher education are charged with preserving, cultivating, and disseminating aesthetic and cultural values in art, music, and literature. Attempting to evaluate the cost effectiveness of aesthetic appreciation for art through a liberal education is a meaningless task. Yet in our quantitatively-oriented age, administrators are often called upon (by funding sources such as state legislatures) to do just that (Matthews, 1976).

Consequently, in higher education, production and environmental information (i.e., demand for courses, enrollments, graduations, program costs, etc.) is gathered not so much for making operational decisions but rather as a part of a very complex political position-building process used to defend various special interests or values within the institution and to the external world. To achieve this political end, administrators do not make decisions individually, but rather seek a consensus between various competing interest groups in which "compromise takes precedence over performance and results" (Parker & Gardener, 1978, p. 9). Therefore, it is critical for institutional researchers to understand the administrative context of the research request in order to provide timely and appropriate information.

A second area of misunderstanding is the exact nature of the role of the institutional researcher (Gilmore, 1976). All too often administrators see institutional researchers as data-gatherers and not information-providers. Sometimes administrators surrender the decision-making process to institutional researchers because the researchers are seen as experts. To be most useful, institutional researchers need to participate in information gathering in supporting roles.

Researchers should aid administrators in formulating questions which will provide data which can be analyzed into useful information. So as not to usurp the role of the administrator, the researcher needs to present information free of value judgments, clearly (without jargon), and in terms that the administrator can

understand, thereby allowing and encouraging the administrator to begin the decision process.

Lack of Ongoing Reciprocal Relationships

It is important to keep in mind that the decision-making process of higher education is a political one in which social influence is very important. To get his/her information used by administrators, the institutional researcher must be seen by the administrators as being a trustworthy source of useful and objective information. Therefore it is to the advantage of both parties for the researcher to make an active effort to get to know the administrators through both formal and informal social contacts (Gilmore, 1976). Through these social contacts the administrators and researcher can realize at least four benefits: 1) getting to know one another reduces the fear of the unknown, 2) learning a common language enhances further communication, 3) innovative ways of aiding administrators become more visible to the researcher, 4) the researcher becomes more aware of the political realities of the institution. By building friendly but politically neutral social relationships the researcher is thereby less likely to be seen as a threat in the internal politics of consensus, increasing the acceptability of institutional research information.

Apprehension Regarding Research Information

Institutional research is often viewed with apprehension by administrators who are concerned that the information might be used by others to undermine their position in the internal or external political arena (Balderston, 1974). Often, even asking for

information about any aspect of the institution is suspect. As a consequence, institutional research is restricted and/or the information provided is generally ignored on the assumption that "what you don't know won't hurt you." It behooves the researcher, as far as practical, to involve all interested parties in the research from the beginning and to present the results in as non-threatening (but accurate) terms as possible. (Inclusion by the researcher of recommendations for a course of action in a formal report can have a political connotation, thus restricting circulation of the report.) Once the administrators have "survived" knowing the unpleasant, and even benefited from the efforts of institutional researchers, their services are likely to be requested again. However, reaching this point generally requires time, effort, patience and understanding on the part of everyone involved.

Case Study of a Cooperative Venture

The experience at Georgia State University during the past year has proved that reinforcement for planned change is possible through use of institutional research information. Over several years administrators and researchers have built mutually beneficial relationships. This case study will illuminate the process by which institutional research is effective in such a context.

For the past several years academic deans and the administrative offices have been on the receiving end of annoying, nagging, worrying stories of unfortunate experiences of students who were trying to be admitted and/or registered. The dean of admissions/registrar was seen as the person to whom these experiences

were related--he would "do" something--should do something--to make the situation better for everyone. The climax of the situation came when fall registration was so horrific that lines blocked entrance to the men's faculty restroom and students complained at every administrative office. Everything that could go wrong did go wrong.

So, a task force was appointed. Vice presidents and academic deans were assigned the responsibility by the executive vice president to check the whole process and to see that something was done. Tensions were high and the long, bony finger of blame was pointed at the dean of admissions/registrar and his subordinates. Meeting followed meeting and finally some communication was established. The task force began to see that some specific information was necessary and institutional research was asked to find out just what the image of the university was.

One of the ways of assessing the image of the university was to survey high school counselors across the state about their perception of all aspects of the admissions/advisement/registration process, including academic advisors, secretaries, faculty--in fact, the entire university. Joint construction of the instrument by administrators and institutional researchers facilitated communications between them and made it clear that the survey was to function as only one step toward the solution of the problem. The instrument, mailed to high school counselors, was constructed so as to assess the university's image and simultaneously to inform the counselors about the university. By increasing the scope of the survey, the administration as a whole was encouraged to regard the problems

as holistic--we have a problem--rather than to blame one segment of the university.

The results of the survey were mixed. Academic excellence, the life blood of any good university, was recognized by the respondents. Many departments and individual programs were praised. Georgia State University was seen as a good place at which to complete an undergraduate education or to attain a graduate degree. Its low cost was viewed as an attractive feature. These positive responses indicated that the university had a basically good image upon which to build.

However, the university was also seen as an impersonal, bureaucratic institution which at best was disinterested and at worse negative to undergraduate students, a criticism common to many large public universities in urban settings. Frequently cited reasons for saying Georgia State University was disinterested or negative to students included: 1) high schools never having been visited by a Georgia State University recruiter; 2) slow responses to requests for information from the admissions office, i.e., up to 4 and 5 months; 3) being unable to get a prompt, accurate and/or polite response to telephone contacts especially from the admissions office; 4) lost records and transcripts in the admissions office; and 5) a lack of any kind of published information from Georgia State University.

For counselors employed beyond 50 miles from Georgia State University, the lack of supervised housing for "immature" students becomes an important factor in counselors' recommendation of schools.

Some of the counselors who had personal experience with the university regarded the staff as both unfriendly and uninformed about the functioning of the university. Other areas of concern to counselors included: 1) the uncertain safety of students in downtown Atlanta, 2) the lack of adequate parking, 3) the poor timing of continuing adult educational workshops and lectures, 4) the need for a more visible public service role for the faculty, 5) the need for a better sports program, 6) the need for more student activities, 7) the lack of safe, supervised housing for students, and 8) the lack of information about jobs or financial aid for students.

From these findings, two implications emerged: 1) Georgia State University is regarded by many counselors as an academically strong university with a fine faculty but these counselors are strongly dissatisfied with their inability to establish responsive contacts with Georgia State University. They emphasized their displeasure with personal contacts, unanswered correspondence, and coldness exhibited by Georgia State University personnel; 2) the closer counselors are employed to Georgia State University, the stronger their dissatisfaction seemed to be. The farther away counselors are employed from Georgia State University, the less they knew about Georgia State University, and consequently had fewer criticisms and complaints, but expressed great need for personal contacts, catalogs, and publications.

In short, the results indicated that the university suffers the problems typical of large bureaucratic organizations. However, unlike many, administrators and researchers have been willing

to enter into a cooperative venture to identify the problems and take corrective action.

Even before the final results were presented, some officials were shaken by the fact that a study was being made and began to take defensive action. In fact, memos, even up to 50 pages, flew hot and heavy, defending the position of a particular office or individual. However, when the completed study was presented to the Task Force, it was clear that the problem was a holistic one affecting the entire university, and a reassessment of the situation took place. The academic deans offered personnel, funds and assistance to implement widespread corrective action.

Institutional Research at Georgia State University has been doing surveys and studies for some time. Although many were used in the recent self study and many are used by the administration in planning, none have had the widespread impact that this one had. Why?

The success of this joint venture is attributed to: 1) the composition of the task force appointed to address a major issue--a group which recognized the need for institutional research support and requested specific studies, 2) the fact that fall quarter admissions/registration had been a disaster, 3) the traumatic confirmation by an outside group of everybody's secret conclusions, and 4) a realization that the information could be used to make the needed changes--a bridge to a new environment.

This research was planned so that the results could be presented in the most forceful way--simply, straightforwardly, and

objectively. Too frequently studies are presented in a manner which makes an administrator feel ineffective and frustrated--often like the little boy whose grandmother gave him a book on penguins for his birthday. His thank you note read:

Dear Grandmother,

Thank you for the book on penguins. It told me more than I wanted to know about penguins. . .

The results could have been presented with correlations, complex analyses, and other statistical jargon. It is doubtful that this would have helped the task force, which simply wanted to know: What is the situation? How can the situation be changed? What will be the impact of such change?

A pragmatic approach by the institutional researcher in presenting information needed by administrators to solve a critical problem can foster mutual understandings, creating a climate conducive to effective planned change in the advancement of an institution.

Summary

This paper describes a cooperative effort by administrators and institutional researchers to assess the public image of an institution of higher education as one step in the planning process. It discusses the interpersonal dynamics occurring in the recognition of the general problem, the formulation of specific questions, the design of the survey instrument, and the communication of the results. The results of the case study--external negative evaluations--were transformed into a framework to reinforce planned change to make the recruitment/admissions/registration process more efficient and

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